

Sermon – April 11th – 10.30 Parish Eucharist – John 21:19-31, Acts 4:32-37

To the disciples, the death of Jesus appeared as the most shattering event in their lives. They thought they had lost their Master forever! It had also revealed to them, their utter fragility as human beings. Peter had denied Him. The others had scattered. John alone was left at the cross with his mother, Mary. For them, Good Friday was Bad Friday. The Jewish authorities, always a little scary, now seemed threateningly powerful.

And yet, they were together again on that first day! Something held them. They had locked the doors. They were afraid of being arrested. They had lost all hope for the future. Jesus, risen from the dead, steps into this situation through closed doors. No word of condemnation. Shalom to you, my friends! The word means 'wholeness and wellbeing, included in peace'. For Jesus, it went back to his final word on the cross, "It is finished!" What was finished? The restlessness and enmity in the human heart, the hostility we have to God and to our neighbour, the trouble we bring on ourselves. Jesus, the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice met all the need we have to restore our broken relationship with God the Father and bring us back as welcome members of God's family. All that God had for us came into that room on that day because Jesus had suffered. It is why He showed them His hands and His side. And it is why those dispirited disciples were overjoyed when they saw Him.

Jesus repeats what He has said. "Shalom! Peace be with you." This time there is a further meaning to it. The first time is for reassurance and life. The second time it is to commission and send out. The Father sent Jesus into the world to bring us the Good News. The Son sends the disciples into the world to take the Good News to others. All in a short space of time! He breathes His life giving breath on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit!" He makes them aware of His power to forgive – when that power is being welcomed and when it is refused. What an amazing meeting that was! And when Jesus brings us together the same experience can be ours as together we move out as His disciples.

We can see in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles what the consequence was of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on them, later confirmed more dramatically on the day of Pentecost. It gave rise to an extraordinary community! Its members shared everything they had, looked out for one another and were extravagant in their desire to see that none of their number was in need. As well as this, the apostles who had been so fearful were now totally fearless in telling all Jerusalem that Jesus had risen from the dead. There were no limits to their comfort zone! The Book of Acts shows them taking the good news to the far corners of the world, often at the cost of prison, persecution and even death.

And so we come back to Thomas, who was not there when Jesus appeared to the disciples on the first occasion. Where was he? Perhaps he was nursing his wounds alone. We have clues about his character. He had a sense of dogged determination – honest, possibly a bit of a loner. Maybe he wanted to reflect privately on what had happened. Most, if not all of us, are like that at times, wanting to be on our own. The pandemic has shown us the danger of being on our own all the time! ‘Mental anxiety’ has come into our vocabulary. This condition was the first human need that God addressed in Scripture, “It is not good that man should be alone.”

Loneliness eats away at us. Thomas by himself became Thomas the sceptic. The enthusiasm of the others does not convince him. “Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, I will not believe.”

A week later he is with the others and Jesus is back again standing among them. “Peace, shalom, be with you.” No reproach that the doors were still locked! Can you imagine how Thomas was beginning to feel? How his heart must have been thumping as Jesus turned towards him. “What was it you said a little time ago? Well, put your finger here and reach out your hand! Stop doubting and believe.” I wonder if Thomas actually did so. I think he was overcome with wonder. His heart dissolved and he simply said, “My Lord and my God.”

When the Lord touches one of us, it affects the rest of us. God loves us personally for who we are and treats each of us as His special child. But He also puts us together as family members to learn from one another and to pray for one another. This should be a growing experience. From simply being polite, we can learn about one another, pray for each other, enter sensitively into each other’s experience of being disciples without barging in where we are not wanted. Jesus sums it up by saying. “Love one another” and John describes the ultimate step. Jesus laid down His life for us. We ought to lay down our lives for one another.’

God promises, “The best is yet to be!” In spite of the pandemic He has a great future for us as His family and His witnesses in Rustington. Let us help one another in passing on His peace and shalom, to those around us. Natalie, in her weekly update, has written, “We have a unique opportunity to reshape the life of the church in Rustington in terms of our mission, ministry and worship.” Let’s move forward with the Holy Spirit to share the good news of Jesus in our village. The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed!